

**Stamford Youth Services Bureau
Center for Youth Leadership**

Why Wait for Someone Else to Make a Difference?

**Connecticut Legislature
Judiciary Committee
*Testimony in Support of House Bill 6186:
An Act Protecting School Children
March 4, 2015***

Leticia Sanchez and Namrata Ramakrishna

Good afternoon Senator Coleman, Representative Tong and members of the committee. We have a special greeting for Senator Boucher, Representative Morris, Representative Flexer, Representative Fox and Representative Simmons, some of whom represent our districts, and all of whom we have worked with in the past.

My name is Leticia Sanchez and I am from the Center for Youth Leadership at Brien McMahon High School in Norwalk. This is Namrata Ramakrishna from the Mayor's Youth Leadership Council, which is a program of the Stamford Youth Services Bureau at Stamford High School. On behalf of our 382 members, we are here to testify in support of *HB 6186, An Act to Protect School Children*.

It's ironic that this hearing is taking place on the same day that a teacher from Stamford High will be sentenced for a sexual relationship she had with one of her students; a relationship that jump-started a series of actions (or inactions) by school administrators and school district officials that has led to this hearing. So, while there will be some closure today, the healing has only just begun. Healing for the student; healing for the teacher; and healing for a school district that failed to protect one of its students.

Just like background checks, we know that the child abuse reporting training called for in Public Act 11-93 is not a cure-all, especially since it does not include any sanctions for schools districts that fail to insure teacher training. And this is

assuming that schools districts even know about the law. This came up during the phone calls that our members made to every school district in the state. They called to ask if the school districts maintains a data base of employees by name, the date they took the child abuse reporting course and the date they are scheduled to re-take the course.

Of the districts we spoke with, just a handful reported that they maintain such a database. Officials from many school districts confessed to not knowing about the law, or the letter sent by the Department of Education commissioner in August 2011 that outlined the requirements of the law. Granted, a school or two within a district may keep a database of its employees, but a centralized, district-wide database does not seem to exist in many school districts.

Generally speaking, we are in favor of the legislation as outlined in the draft of HB 6186 because it strengthens Public Act 11-93. However, we do have several questions and comments:

1. We agree with the requirement of a training program and refresher course about child abuse reporting for each school employee, but we're not sure how practical and cost efficient it is for the Department of Children and Families to conduct such training in-person, as outlined subsection "c" of Section 1. According to Tom DeMatteo of the Department of Children and Families legal department, a power point course is available online for school employees to complete. While that may be more convenient and cost efficient, we're not sure how effective it is. So, you may want to ask the Departments of Education and Children and Families to come up with the best way to conduct the training, especially the refresher course. In addition, you may want to consider a requirement that all school employees complete a national criminal background check every three or five years. - 2 -

2. We're still confused about how the legislation defines a "child." In Section 2, subsection 1 the phrases "...under the age of 18 years" and "...any person 18 years of age or older" appear, and in subsection "a" of Section 12 the phrase "...any child under the age of 16" appears. Can the legislation simply read, "any person, regardless of age, who is enrolled and attending a public elementary, middle or high school in a local or regional school district?"

3. We agree with subsections 2 and 3 of Section 2 about the penalty and training program for people who interfere with the making of a report of child abuse.

4. In subsection 3 of Section 6 you want to consider adding another layer of reporting. We suggest that the chairperson of each academic department in a school certify to the principal that each teacher and teacher's aide in the department is in compliance with the training and refresher course. This should also hold true for the persons in charge of nonacademic departments; for example, custodians, office staff, and others. Given the research we conducted with school districts, we agree that school superintendents should certify compliance with the law to the State Commission of Education.

5. Although we agree with the concept, we anticipate some pushback from school districts about the creation of "confidential rapid response team" in each school district to coordinate with the Department of Children and Families, as outlined in Section 10 of the legislation. There may be some union issues with the make-up of the team, especially if it includes non-school district employees, which we believe it should to insure objectivity.

6. We understand the language of Section 11 of the legislation regarding the rehire of a school employee by a same school district, but what restrictions or requirements, if any, are applied to the person who seeks employment in another school district?

- 3 -

Finally, please know that we appreciate the effort you are leading to make our schools safe. We realize that the large majority of school employees would never do anything to harm a child. Unfortunately, as we have seen in current cases in Stamford, Westport and other school districts, there are some, which is why the requirements of HB 6186 should be part of every school district's safety plan.

Thanks for the opportunity to testify.

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